

Tortured ends and means

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 21, 2015](#) issue



Fernando Botero, Abu Ghraib series. Image by [Mark Barry](#), licensed under [Creative Commons](#).

Philosophers and ethicists have long pondered whether a good and noble end justifies any means of attaining it. The age-old debate has come up again with the release of the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on CIA detention activities following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Consequentialists (like Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and currently Sam Harris and Peter Singer) would argue that good outcomes justify the means employed to accomplish them. President Harry Truman reasoned that dropping atomic bombs on Japanese cities, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians, was justified because it avoided an even more

ghastly loss of life in an American invasion of Japan.

On the other hand, deontologists conclude that the morality of an act derives from the act itself rather than the outcome. They are certain that killing or torturing people is always wrong even if it saves many more innocent lives.

Thirteen years after 9/11, we are discovering and pondering the details of the methods our government employed to track down the people who attacked us, their support networks, and those organizations and individuals who make no secret of their intent to harm Americans.

In the 1930s and '40s, Reinhold Niebuhr broke with Social Gospel and pacifist academics and journalists, including the editor of this magazine, because he believed that it was morally irresponsible not to respond with force to the rising fascist movements in Germany, Italy, and Japan. Moral responsibility requires resisting evil, Niebuhr reasoned. I find that argument compelling. And I'm grateful for our armed forces and intelligence agencies and the men and women who devote their lives to our security.

That said, I can't agree that torturing a human being is justified if it produces greater national security. For one thing, the value and sanctity of human life is at the heart of our national ethics—and of Christian faith. This nation grew out of the conviction that individuals are endowed with unalienable rights. Although we are still struggling to live into that radical notion, it remains at the very center of who we are as a people. It is our core value.

In addition, Niebuhrian realists would acknowledge that torture does not produce reliable information. Torture sometimes works in the opposite way as victims of sustained physical pain may say whatever their torturers want to hear in order to stop the agony.

The United States military understands that fact and forbids torture, not only because it invites an enemy to reciprocate and endangers the lives of American soldiers who are captured, but also because the information gained is not always accurate or useful.

Senator John McCain is one national figure who argues against the use of torture. McCain's position on torture is grounded in his own experience as a POW. He was subjected to years of torture at the hands of his North Vietnamese captors. McCain says torture doesn't work and is always wrong. I agree.